THE ROLE OF THE NURSE IN REPRODUCTIVE AND GENETIC TECHNOLOGIES

CNA POSITION

CNA believes nurses have a crucial role to play in advocating the availability of good information and public participation in shaping policies about assisted human reproduction; genetic testing; genetic therapy; genetic enhancements; the human genome project and privacy concerns; and human cloning.

Nurses have an equally important role to play in providing unbiased counselling to clients, in referring them to reproductive and genetic specialists and genetic counsellors as required and in translating technical medical information to those struggling to make choices about their use of reproductive and genetic technologies.

As such, nurses have a responsibility to become knowledgeable about the rapidly changing field of biological, reproductive and genetic breakthroughs, so they are able to engage in informed discussions with clients and the public.

Nurses with in-depth preparation and experience in the field of reproductive health and/or genetic counselling have additional abilities in assisting clients and contributing to well-informed decisions about the risks and benefits of various forms of assisted human reproduction and/or genetic testing. Such nurses must be involved in determining how reproductive and genetic technologies should be evaluated and monitored, who should use the technologies and which ones should be regarded as essential health care services.

CNA believes health promotion and disease prevention approaches to the known causes of infertility must be given priority as effective and efficient means of increasing fertility.

BACKGROUND

Keeping abreast of recent advances in biological discoveries, which create new possibilities in assisted human reproduction; genetic testing and therapy; and the use of human cloning, is difficult for health professionals and the public alike. The magnitude of possibilities is staggering and the ethical limits uncertain. Because registered nurses are respected health professionals with knowledge of human sciences, they are trusted advocates for the ethical use of these new technologies.

Opinion is divided on the multifaceted issues that challenge society’s fundamental values.

Some see these developments as bringing hope to individuals who are infertile or burdened with genetic disease. Others regard these discoveries with alarm out of concern for the dignity of humans (particularly women, children and families) and for the common good of humanity.

1 Nurse(s) refers to registered nurse(s) throughout this document.
The following are key areas of ethical concern and controversy:

- The moral status of the embryo, fetus and organisms created by cloning as a function of selective reduction of pregnancy, use of spare embryos not needed in IVF for purpose of research and creating embryos for research purposes;
- The protection of the child as a function of reproduction through donor insemination, surrogacy, duplicate identity through cloning, right to know genetic heritage and to have genetic heritage protected by privacy legislation;
- Access to sound reproductive technologies by all citizens;
- The integrity of family relationships when reproductive and genetic technologies such as surrogacy, cloning, genetic alteration are employed;
- The safety of products developed for therapeutic cloning and the lack of evidence to know longer term effects;
- The potential for abuse of genetic testing, such as denying individuals life insurance, and abuse of testing in the workplace leading to job loss, stigmatization;
- The morality of presymptomatic genetic testing in cases where no therapeutic treatment can yet be provided (i.e., Huntington's chorea);
- The morality of sex selection and genetic enhancement (e.g., creating the perfect child);
- The commercialization of reproductive technologies (e.g., infertility as a business) and genetic technologies including cloning techniques (e.g., treating body parts and processes as items that can be bought and sold);
- The potential benefits of stem cell research versus the protection of human embryos;
- The claims for patents on living organisms in order to realize future profits versus the human genome as a public treasure; and
- The need for valid information available to the public on all these issues for informed public and personal choices.

In considering issues surrounding reproductive and genetic technologies, nurses are guided by the Ethical Guidelines for Nurses Involved in Research with Human Participants as well as the Tri-council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

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References:


Replaces:
The Role of the Nurse in Reproductive and Genetic Technologies (1997)

Also see:
CNA Position Statement: Joint Statement on Preventing and Resolving Ethical Conflicts Involving Health Care Providers and Persons Receiving Care (1999)
CNA Position Statement: Privacy of Personal Health Information (2001)
CNA Position Statement: The Role of the Nurse in the Use of Health Care Technology (1992)
CNA Position Statement: The Role of the Nurse in Reproductive and Sexual Health (1992)
CNA Fact Sheet: Glossary of Terms Related to Reproductive and Genetic Technologies (2002)